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FOR DRL DAS BARKS-RUGGLES FROM CHARGE HOAGLAND

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/10/2007  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)  
SUBJECT: YOUR VISIT TO TURKMENISTAN

Classified By: CHARGE RICHARD E. HOAGLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Erica: We look forward to your visit and want to ensure it will contribute to building our new bilateral relationship with Turkmenistan. In the nine months since the death of former President Niyazov, the new government has taken deliberate steps to move the country back toward the mainstream from the eccentricities and outrages of the Niyazov era. President Berdimuhamedov early on announced his domestic priorities of repairing and reforming health care and education, and he's tasked the government to prepare a national program for rural development. Whereas Niyazov was increasingly isolationist and xenophobic toward the end of his life, Berdimuhamedov has had an ambitious travel schedule to re-establish foreign relations. Very early in his tenure, he accepted Secretary Rice's offer to "turn the page" and establish a new, broad-based relationship. Your visit will be part of that effort.

12. (C) The government has taken steps to improve its human rights practices. It is working better with the OSCE than it has in a decade, has greatly relaxed both internal and international travel restrictions for its citizens, has begun to release political prisoners, has reportedly banned child labor in the cotton harvest, has welcomed our USCIRF delegation and has begun to register "non-traditional" religious groups. In perspective, these are limited but significant achievements. We have heard again and again, including from President Berdimuhamedov, "Tell us concrete and specific steps you want us to take, and we will work on them." We believe this is not just rhetoric to try to please us.

13. (C) However, this is a government severely handicapped by its largely unreformed Soviet past and Niyazovian depredations. There's no denying the current government is strongly authoritarian, even if relatively benign. All decisions -- political, economic, and social -- are made at the top, and only after long and opaque-to-us debate in the cabinet of ministers and with who-knows-whatever other influences. Even once decisions are made, the bureaucracy does not always implement them smoothly and consistently. We believe there are those at high levels who oppose and try to block reform.

14. (C) Further, we know the government is under persistent pressure from Russia, and probably to a lesser extent from Iran, to limit the influence of the United States. Russian black propaganda continues the drumbeat that our commitment to "democracy" is really a covert program to overthrow the "legitimate governments" of the region and to sow chaos for our own political and economic advantage. While this seems ludicrous to us, it is a very real and powerful brake on what he hope to achieve.

¶5. (C) In short, this is a very complex period. We're still trying to figure out what this government -- not yet a year old -- really is and how to interact with it most effectively. I believe if we are patient, respectful, consistent, and persistent, we will be able to achieve many of the goals we have set -- but they won't necessarily come quickly, and they will never come easily.

¶6. (C) I have heard in recent months this government really does not like generalized lectures that "call upon it" and "urge it" and "lay down markers." It wants to hear concrete steps we want it to take. Because Foreign Minister Meredov seems to be pushing the government toward liberalization, I think your most important meeting here will be with him. It would be useful if you could provide to him a written short list of concrete, near-term objectives (in effect, a non-paper we would have time to translate in advance of the meeting) that we would like to see the government achieve. I'd recommend it not be a full laundry list, but, rather, "limited, concrete, and achievable." We'd be glad to work with you to develop this. I think our chances of success are better if we go step by step.

¶7. (SBU) A short note on timing and logistics. Your visit comes immediately before Turkmenistan's Independence Day (October 27) celebrations. As you can imagine, this is not just "fireworks and a picnic on the Mall." The government has already published a long, long list of public events for the entire week leading up to October 27. Already, traffic is rather badly disrupted in the center of the city as rehearsals continue daily for the various parades and other public events that will take place. As we get closer to October 27, official meetings will be increasingly hard to get, and none will be possible October 25-27. That said, we believe we can still put together a very useful and instructive schedule for you that will help to achieve U.S. policy goals and objectives. We will provide you in advance a draft schedule (always subject to change here!) and a broader scene-setter cable.

¶8. (U) We eagerly anticipate your visit. Let's work together to make it a success.

¶9. (U) Best regards, Dick.  
HOAGLAND